

[Elmer Thomas]

W3621

Forms to be Filled out for Each Interview

FORM A

Circumstances of Interview [?1]/8/39

FOLKLORE

CHICAGO

STATE

NAME OF WORKER Betty Burke

ADDRESS 1339 S. Troy St.

DATE May 11, 1939

SUBJECT American Lives Packinghouse worker on killing floor

1. Date and time of interview May 10, 6:30 p.m.
2. Place of interview 5413 Calumet Ave.
3. Name and address of informant Elmer Thomas 5413 Calumet
4. Name and address of person, if any, who put you in touch with informant. None
5. Name and address of person, if any, accompanying you

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None

6. Description of room, house, surroundings, etc.

Two rooms in a nicely kept flat, 3rd floor, kitchen and bathroom shared by three families, including the Thomases. Comfortably furnished, definitely middle class, crowded. Dining room set and three piece parlor set in one room, besides occasional tables, radio, etc. Very congested district, 20 and more people living in flat apts. build to house no more than 6 persons. This neighborhood not the poorest nor the most crowded of the South Side Black Belt, either.

FORM B

Personal History of Informant

FOLKLORE

CHICAGO

STATE

NAME OF WORKER Betty Burke

ADDRESS 1339 S. Troy St.

DATE May 10, 1939

SUBJECT Packinghouse worker

NAME OF INFORMANT Elmer Thomas

1. Ancestry Negro

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2. Place and date of birth Eastern Illinois Around 32 years of age
3. Family Wife, stepson
4. Places lived in, with dates Marion, Ill., Chicago, Ill.
5. Education, with dates Finished 4 yrs. high school in Marion
6. Occupations and accomplishments, with dates Butcher in sheep kill for 12 years
7. Special skills and interests Is secretary of his union local and steward in his dept. at work
8. Community and religious activities Belongs to the Metropolitan Non-denominational Church at 41st and South Parkway. Proud of the fact that his church bars no one from its doors, and makes no issue of color, creed or sect.
9. Description of informant Very clean and neat, dresses rather expensively for wkr. Well built 6 footer, dark brown skinned, quietly intelligent, plain speaking. Likes to discuss problems and solutions to his race's problems. Very race conscious. Thinks his people ought to concentrate more on business administration courses in their education, rather than the more specialized professions of lawyer, doctor, or any of the 'arts'.
10. Other Points gained in interview

Elmer Thomas

Form B

Thinks this would build the initiative necessary for them to create their own centers of industrial and economic activity, and do away with the extreme exploitation of the Negro

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in his own community, at least. Says Jewish merchants and absentee landlords are worst and most resented.

FORM C

Text of Interview (Unedited)

FOLKLORE

CHICAGO

STATE

NAME OF WORKER Betty Burke

ADDRESS 1339 S. Troy St.

DATE May 10, 1939

SUBJECT Packinghouse worker

NAME OF INFORMANT Elmer Thomas

Time ah went to the yards they put me on as a laborer on the Killing floor. That was in Beef Kill but they soon had me transferred to Sheep Kill. Ah used to try handling a knife, try to do some of the butcher jobs, you know, when the foreman wasn't around. Well, that's a trade and ah wanted to learn it so ah'd have a better chance to keep a job there. Time ah started there was lots of Negro workers there, you know, had been in the yards since they were brought from the South to help break the big strike, well, they'd let me pick up the trade, helping them on the job. Foreman, he come over once and see ah knew how to handle a knife so ah got a butchering job as soon as there was call for that. What ah do is cut off sheep's head after it's been dressed. Ah been doing that particular job more than 12 years now. Ah Know fellows, told me when they started in the yards, and tried to

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learn to butcher, white men on the floor didn't like to see it. They'd do almost anything to keep them from learning, throw anything they could lay hands on at them, knives, sheep fat cups, punches, (that's tools we work with) anything. The white butchers, they hated the Negroes because they figured they would scab on them when trouble came and then get good paying, skilled jobs besides. Well, that was a long time back, with the CIO in, all that's like a bad dream gone. Oh, we still have a hard now but this time the white men are with us and we're with them.

FORM D

Extra Comment

FOLKLORE

CHICAGO

STATE

NAME OF WORKER Betty Burke

ADDRESS 1339 S. Troy St.

DATE May 10, 1939

SUBJECT Packing house worker

NAME OF INFORMANT Elmer Thomas

You take pork packing. Jobs like that, they're clean, easy, light. You won't find Negroes working there. They won't give them such jobs. When they 'raise a gang', (that's a term they use in the yards when there's new men being hired), you can bet you won't see any Negroes coming in. Like in '33, they were hiring young white boys, 16 and 18 years old, raw kids, didn't know a thing, but there were plenty of colored boys waiting for the same

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chance who never got it. Hank Johnson, just the other night said he'd bet there hadn't been a Negro hired in Armour's in 7 years. He knows what he's talking about. Of course, they lay off Negroes who later are rehired. But if they haven't worked there before they don't stand a chance. Ah remember one time ah was fired. Ah was doin' my job and the work was coming too fast so ah had to let some of it go on by. Well, ah know the boss was drunk and he come by, asked me why ah didn't keep up and ah told him. He was too drunk to listen, just got mad and said 'get to hell out o' here.' Ah see there was no use arguin' with him like he was. Just picked up my coat and hat and walked out. Three days later they called me back to work. Ah thought they'd take away my vacation time for that, but they didn't. Never will know why they didn't break my seniority on account of it. Guys would tell about when they 'worked for the church.' A man would finish his work and go punch the time clock. Then he'd have to come back and work without being paid for the time he was putting in. Never had to do that myself, but sometimes the foremen would make us work five, ten minutes overtime, and finally we stopped that. At that time they had those big sheep fat cups hanging on the chains. We'd see they were working us past supper hour. Man farthest away from the foreman would whistle and all the guys at work would start hollering 's-o-u-p' and whistling and banging the cups around, working all the time, you know. So they couldn't fire us all and we made so much racket they quit that particular chiseling after the first few times.

There's an old man, he pulls hot fat. Pulls hot fat off the carcass and stows it in the fat cups. He's been on the killing floor for thirty years, and been stone blind for twenty years. He can get around on that floor as well as anyone of us with eyesight. Knows every man on the floor by the sound of his voice. He does his full share of work, and better than most, at that. Ah was workin' with him 6 months before ah found out he was blind, he gets around that good. Don't know how he lost his sight. He don't need but a man to take him home at night and bring him to work mornings. Guess after you been working thirty years at one job you don't need much else except habit to keep going. Some guys come to work

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drunk, so drunk that they can hardly walk, but they can do their work. They've been doing the same thing for so many years, they can do it sleeping.

They have a 'credit union' in Armour's, keeps a lot of people out of the CIO. If you want a loan from them you have to have a 'good' record. Well, some fellow, colored fellow, he tried to get a loan. They knew he was a Union man, so they made it hard for him. Told him to get some worker with a bank account in the credit union to vouch for him. Fellow went and got Charlie. Charlie'd been in the yards a long time and he happened to have some money there. He walked into the office and signed them papers, and them in charge of the loans with their eyes popping like a fish' out of water. Manager asked Charlie to step into his private office, he was so upset. He said to him, 'You really mean you want to sign for that man, and he a colored man! I hate to think of a white man would want to take on that responsibility.' Charlie, he's Irish, and he looked at this manager and grinned. He said, 'Well, sure now, I do appreciate that bit of advice, seein' you ain't chargin' nuthin' for it. But that black boy's my friend. He works with me. He's a union brother and I guess maybe you're surprised to hear that I'm with the union, too! So just save that advice of yours for somebody don't know no better.' Walked out of there and slammed the door. You think that colored fellow didn't get his loan? He got it. Manager couldn't do a thing. He really spoke his piece out of turn that time. Got a union man mad, that time, and got himself told.

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